

REMEMBERING ROE

Ritual Guide from NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN

A ritual guide to remember and honor lives lost as a result of abortion bans.

Rituals matter. They can help ground us and mark times of change and transition. They can connect the mundane and less-mundane moments in our lives to our heritage, to our tradition, to who we are, and to the sacred — and to God, if that language resonates for you. Rituals hold space for our feelings and our truths — a container for us to own, express, and offer them out to the divine, to the universe. Rituals can also be ways of claiming as holy moments that are not always perceived in our society as being holy.

This guide provides Jewish ritual context to remember and honor lives lost due to abortion bans. Included are basic scripts, resources, and suggestions. These rituals can be used together or individually — whatever feels most appropriate to your community and/or setting. Take license and tweak, edit, or adapt any of these rituals to best suit your needs.

On June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, which had guaranteed federal rights to abortion access for half a century. While this guide is entitled *Remembering Roe* in reference to the anniversary of this decision, these rituals may be used at any time you feel called to memorialize lives lost or irrevocably altered due to abortion bans — perhaps on the date of a critical ban or clinic closure in your state — or as you honor a more personal experience.

Contents

- Candle-Lighting Ritual
- A Prayer for Those Harmed by Abortion Bans
- Walking Encounter Ritual
- Stone Placing Ritual
- A Prayer for Placing Stones
- Additional Resources

Candle-Lighting Ritual



Roe v. Wade was always the floor, not the ceiling. Too many people lacked reproductive access under *Roe*. It was never enough. But we can also acknowledge the millions impacted by its reversal.

Yizkor literally means “May [God] remember.” It is a word often used to invoke the communal memorial prayers said on Yom Kippur and on the last days of Sukkot (*Shemini Atzeret*), Passover, and Shavuot. Because we say it on these public days of gathering, *Yizkor* is often considered communal, but it is, in its essence, a deeply personal prayer. So too is remembering lives lost from abortion bans. While we all are impacted by large-scale communal policies, each life lost is personal.

In Judaism, there is a custom to light a candle to symbolize the *neshamah*, the soul, allowing it to burn until it naturally goes out. We do this before the practice of *yizkor* and to mark the anniversary date of a death, the *yahrtzeit*, as a sign of mourning, remembering, and honoring. The light serves as a reminder of the loss and brightens the home during a dark period.

Light a candle and, if you wish, read the prayer on the following page out loud.

A Prayer

for those harmed by abortion bans

If you are doing this in your community, at a synagogue, by a former abortion clinic, or at another communal space, consider assigning people to recite sections or to read responsively.

As we light this candle, we mourn everyone harmed by abortion bans.

We mourn for millions of people, stripped of agency and dignity.

We mourn those brought into or trapped in poverty, and those unable to leave abusers because they could not access abortion care.

We mourn those who haven't had access for decades — denied essential care by structural misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and hate.

We mourn for those mandated by the state to remain pregnant and give birth.

We mourn for those whose health was endangered by abortion bans.

We mourn for those facing legal consequences for providing, or helping someone seek, abortion care.

We mourn for those who wanted to bring a child into this world and have been impacted by bans — including those now scared to get pregnant, those denied miscarriage care, and those now facing barriers to fertility treatment.

We mourn for those who died giving birth, disproportionately Black women, and for all those who have suffered pregnancy complications.

We mourn for those killed by abusive partners — since the leading cause of death of pregnant women in the United States is, in fact, homicide.

We mourn for all those whose stories we know and for all those whose stories we don't.

Abortion access saves lives.

With this light, we recommit to the fight for reproductive freedom for all.

Amen.

Walking Encounter Ritual

Rabbi Sharon Brous shares a story from the Mishna, a central Jewish text from the third century, about an ancient pilgrimage that was made several times a year. This particular ritual was a gathering of people walking counterclockwise in the Temple Mount Plaza in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, walking clockwise were brokenhearted, mourners, sick and lonely people. As eyes met, the question was asked *“What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?”* After the words of heartache were shared, a blessing was offered: *“May the Holy One comfort you. You are not alone.”*

In the tradition of the Jewish people, we witness one another in community. One such moment is when we end the time of intense mourning after a death, to rise and walk together around the block to acknowledge re-entry to the community.

This ritual invites you to share from your heart about your sorrow — and simultaneously transform this pain into a vision for the future. What if the future of reproductive freedom is more expansive than we could dream? What are your dreams for our future of embodied choice and rights for all people in the US and beyond? In this ritual, we’ll get a chance to share both the grief and the gratitude, the devastation and the dreaming.

In this ritual, we mourn the loss and potential loss of lives due to abortion bans, and we uphold that abortion is life-affirming care. People should always have agency over their bodies, lives, and futures.

Planning

For an individual who wants to share: Gather one or more people to walk with you — perhaps neighbors, friends, family, or other community members.

For a community sharing experience: Identify in advance those who will share and those who want to respond with words of blessings. Depending on the size of your group, you may wish to divide into smaller groups for the walk itself. (We recommend no more than 2 to 3 ‘sharers’ in each small group.)

Choose the location for the walk and encounters. If you have access to a large plaza, that could work well, but it could also be in your neighborhood.

Ritual Walk

Invite people into the ritual to mark the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and all lives lost due to abortion bans.

Walk first in one direction and share an answer to Jewish tradition's question, ***"Why does your heart ache?"*** Make sure that, if there are multiple people sharing, each person has a chance to be heard. Honor the person who is sharing by blessing them with these words: ***"May the holy one comfort you. You are not alone."***
(Alternate: ***"May you be comforted. You are not alone."***)

Once all of the sharers have received a blessing, turn and walk in the other direction around the block to share dreams and visions of the future. The response to these can be ***"ken yih ratzon," "May it be God's will," "May it be so,"*** or however you feel called to affirm these visions and dreams.

Closing

After everyone who wishes has had a chance to share their sorrow and their dreams and be witnessed and blessed, bring the group back together and sing *Olam Chesed Yibaneh* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHp-jcPIKIY) or another song of hope. Alternatively, you can read the lyrics in a way that moves you.

Olam Chesed Yibaneh

*I will build this world from love
And you must build this world from love
And if we build this world from love
Then God will build this world from love*

Stone-Placing Ritual



For generations, Jews have visited the graves of their loved ones and left stones behind. The origins of this custom are lost to time, but it still carries a great deal of meaning for many contemporary Jews. Stones do not fade or wilt; they remain constant, like our love and connection to those we have lost. Stones can also serve as a marker of protection and safety.

Abortion bans, other restrictions on reproductive health care access, and the closing of reproductive health clinics can be deadly for pregnant people. As we remember *Roe*, we mourn those who have been harmed or lost their lives because they could not get the care they needed.

This ritual can be performed privately or in a group.

Supplies

- One stone for every participant
- Paint pens or permanent markers

Instructions

1. **Find a stone.** It can be a stone you find particularly beautiful or compelling, but it doesn't have to be. If you are gathering a group together, it can be helpful to have a bowl/bucket of stones for people to select from.
2. **Write/draw on the stone one of the following:**
 - the name of someone who has died due to a lack of abortion access
 - an image or word that speaks to your grief, your anger, or your hope
 - paint the stone black
 - leave it blank
3. **Choose a site** with meaning and resonance to you or your group (for example: a clinic where abortions used to be performed, or outside a legislative building in which restrictive laws were passed). Gather folks together with their stones. Invite everyone, in silence, to place their stones on/in front of the building. It's okay if the stones pile on top of each other.
4. **Once all the stones have been placed,** you can ask someone to share the following prayer, sing a *niggun* (a wordless melody), and/or listen to a song you find meaningful.

A Prayer for placing stones

If you are doing this in your community, at a synagogue, by a former abortion clinic, or at another communal space, consider assigning people to recite sections or to read responsively.

Wellspring of endless compassion,

Healer of souls and of flesh and bone,

Source of justice and Knower of truth,

Grant sweet rest and release to these bright souls who have been taken from us too soon.

May their memories bless all who knew them.

May their stories inspire our revolution and our resolution — that those whose bodies are endowed with the power and potential to nurture the earliest stages of human life can claim for themselves the power of deciding how and when to exercise that potential.

May this space, and all spaces like it, become again a place that offers help and healing, knowledge and choices.

And let us say, *amen*.

Additional Resources



Additional Ritual and Prayers

Ritual guide for abortion and miscarriage care

Prayer for those who have miscarried

Poem for courage

Blessing for choosing your life

For Reproductive Health Care

Visit jewsforabortionaccess.org/resources-for-repro-care

Discover More About How Judaism Views Abortion

The Torah of Reproductive Freedom

My Religion Makes Me Pro-Abortion

This ritual was developed by Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez, Rabbi Megan Doherty, and Kohenet Pleasance Shamirah.